

Croydon Council Children's Centre Consultation

Submission from Cllr Helen Redfern: Shadow Cabinet Member for Children, Young People & Learning

The role of children's centres, as set out in the Sure Start Children's Centre statutory guidance, is to support:

- child development and school readiness
- parenting aspirations and parenting skills
- child and family health and life chances

The new model proposed by the Council will spread the service too thinly and reduce access to such extent that in some areas of the Borough the provision will be negligible to non-existent. Many parents and carers will no longer have access to services that will help their child's development or prepare them for school, to services that help them to develop their own parenting skills or access to services that identify and address health issues at an early stage. Whilst the loss of this service will cut costs in the very short term, it is inevitable that early help will not be offered to some families resulting in greater intervention being required by health, social care and education professionals at a later stage, requiring an even greater level of funding by the Council. This will increase the Council's costs, not reduce them.

The Best Start programme offers outstanding value for money. I ask that Croydon Council reconsider its decision to reduce the numbers of sites offering Best Start services from 22 to 9 sites and specifically request that the Council reconsiders stopping the delivery of services from Purley Oaks Children's Centre and closing Shirley Children's Centre.

The proposed model has been designed using the following data:

- Borough profile - where do children 0-5 and families that would benefit the most live
- Geographical location
- Ease of access for local families
- Transport links
- Facilities and accessibility within the children's centre buildings to enable continued working in partnership with health colleagues to deliver the Healthy Child Programme.

However, it is clear that these criteria are not met through the proposed reduction in service provision. I will address these points specifically for Purley Oaks and Shirley Children's Centres but the commentary could apply to many of the sites suggested for closure.

Borough profile - where do children 0-5 and families that would benefit the most live

Purley Oaks

The proposed model leaves a large area of the south of the Borough with no Best Start provision, through the proposed removal of provision at Purley Oaks Children's Centre and the closure of the Sanderstead Service Access Point. By removing both venues, the Borough Profile criteria cannot be met:

There are clearly a large number of young families in around Purley Oaks and the southern part of the Borough. The vacancy rate in local primary schools (just 6% across the Purley Oaks & Riddlesdown,

Purley & Woodcote, South Croydon, Kenley and Sanderstead, the last of which has 0% vacancy rate) demonstrates that previous modelling has underestimated the number of young children in the area.

Since the commencement of the previous Best Start contract, over 1,400 new homes have been approved in Purley and Woodcote ward with almost all being considered to be family-sized homes and designed to meet the needs of poorer families who would otherwise not be able to afford to live in Croydon. The Planning department advises that Purley & Woodcote is not treated any differently from other parts of the Borough and therefore the number of new family homes being built in and around the Purley area must be in the many thousands. The number of families in the area will have grown in recent years and will continue to do so as these plans are developed further. The southern part of the Borough, which is already poorly served, needs more Best Start provision rather than the closure of the only Children's Centre and Service Access Point.

I understand that this criterion also relates to levels of deprivation. It is not correct that there is no deprivation in the southern part of the Borough and with increasing distances between venues, those in most need will not be reached. Many mothers, despite their previous financial status, will experience a sharp reduction in their income due to the relatively low rate of statutory maternity pay. This can be a stressful time for many families of all backgrounds.

The intake for Purley Oaks Primary School includes 40.8% of children in receipt of Free School Meals or Pupil Premium. The Children's Centre helps families with no recourse to public funds through the free provision of breakfast club and other day to day help. There are also 2 foodbanks in Purley. This demonstrates a level of deprivation in the area that needs a local service.

For many of the purposes that parents visit the Best Start centres, deprivation is not the overriding factor. Parents of all backgrounds experience concerns about the development of their children, require breastfeeding guidance, develop poor peri-natal mental health and can worry about their child's development.

Children's Centres also provide a safe space for those experiencing domestic abuse; we know that domestic abuse does not discriminate by wealth. On my recent visit to Purley Oaks Children's Centre, many parents of a broad range of backgrounds spoke of the centre being a 'lifeline' and that they 'feel safe' there. This is a part of the service that cannot be lost.

Purley Oaks Primary School has been able to track the progress of children who have attended both the Children's Centre and the Primary School and the data demonstrates that on a like for like basis, children who have attended the Children's Centre go on to perform better at Primary School.

Shirley

At the meeting of the BME Forum on Tuesday 8th June, officers described Shirley Children's centre as an example of good practice that offered a great service. According to Croydon Council's own data, the Shirley Children's Centre sits within an area with one of the highest levels of deprivation in Croydon and with a high number of families. Over half of the children at the closest primary school, Forest Academy, are in receipt of Pupil Premium. The closest foodbank is a 2 minute walk away. Therefore, the criterion of concentrating the Best Start where families would benefit most is not met by closing this Centre.

Geographical Location

Purley Oaks

The map of the new model shows a very clear geographical gap in service with no provision in Sanderstead, South Croydon, Purley Oaks & Riddlesdown, Purley and Woodcote and Kenley. It is disappointing that consultation presentations purporting to show the new model have used a map of the existing provision, thus not demonstrating the proposed geographical gap in provision and misrepresenting the proposal. It has also been interesting to witness the response of neutral observers when the correct map is shown. The shock at the extraordinarily large area to the south of the Borough with no provision is clearly evident.

There has been no explanation as to why parents who live in a specific area are to be left with no provision but it is noted both by adults and children in the area that not only is the Best Start service to be lost, that this follows the closure of Purley Pool and Leisure Centre (the only Council leisure facility to remain fully closed) and the library service in Sanderstead being at risk of closure or significant reduction to its provision.

With so many new homes being built in this area, there is a considerable amount of S106 and Community Infrastructure Levy being paid to Croydon Council. The purpose of these payments is to finance local infrastructure in areas in which homes are being built, and yet very little of that income is being returned to where demand has been created. S106 and CIL payments in the area, particularly Purley, would fund the Purley Oaks Children Centre many times over. I ask why there is no intention to use funding locally.

Shirley

The Centre at Shirley largely serves its local community. With so few centres proposed, and an uneven spread of their locations, neither of the Shirley wards will have a Children's Centre. It should be noted that the Map in Appendix 2 has incorrectly placed another Centre from Woodside into Shirley North, again giving an incorrect impression to residents viewing the proposal.

Ease of Access for Local Families and Transport

Officers have indicated an intention for children's centres to be located within an easy walk for families, in part so that there are no travel costs for those living in deprivation. This is clearly not possible given the large geographic gaps in provision and therefore this objective is not met under the proposed model. It is necessary that services be provided close to public transport although this would come at an additional cost to parents needing to travel greater distances.

Extended travel, particularly on multiple buses, would narrow the window of time available for parents who need to drop off older children at school and nursery and also return back to nursery before midday to collect children. This narrowing of the time available is such that for many families, it would not be possible to 'do it all' and the Children's Centre provision would become inaccessible on the basis of time.

The public transport alternatives, which will be explained below, are such that access to services will in many cases be reliant on car use. Families who are most deprived are least likely to have access to a car so immediately access is reduced.

It should also be noted that proposing a model that is car-reliant would be both contrary to the recommendations of Croydon Climate Commission which was set up after the Council declared a Climate & Ecological Emergency.

Purley Oaks

At the outset I would note that a sizeable number of the parents that I have spoken with at Purley Oaks had attempted to attend sessions at alternative venues but had found them to be oversubscribed, particularly at Byron Children's Centre. Therefore, accessibility is already low for local families and with the removal of Purley Oaks Centre and no expansion in the service elsewhere, the rate of oversubscription can only increase and more local families will find that they cannot access services.

Staff at Purley Oaks indicate that c. 80% of their visitors come from within a pram-push distance. The remaining 20% are generally attending the sessions that are either not provided or are oversubscribed elsewhere e.g. speech and language sessions or those for children with additional needs.

For families who live in the geographic void towards the mid south of the Borough, there would be no Best Start Centre within walking distance. For example, Google Maps indicates that the shortest walk to a Centre from Hamsey Green would take just over an hour to the Woodlands Centre. However, Google Maps does not factor in the extra effort of pushing a pram up and downhill, carrying a baby in a sling or walking with a toddler who wishes to examine every paving stone, ant or blade of grass as they go. In fact, it would be a rare toddler who could manage the round trip of 6 miles.

The only physically achievable route from Hamsey Green to Woodlands would be via 2 buses, the second of which (#359) runs only every 30 minutes. Therefore, if buses fail to connect, the travel time could be well over an hour and the Hopper bus fare would not be applicable with a resulting fare of £4.65. That is too much for families to be able to find on a regular basis and would make the Centre only accessible for those with considerable disposable income.

This time taken also makes it impossible for parents with older children to manage to drop off/pick up older children and still make it to the Children's Centre for sessions that start from 9.15am. It is not acceptable to effectively exclude parents with than one child.

Shirley

The same transport issues exist for the users of Shirley Children's Centre. Most of its visitors are from the Shrublands estate for whom this is a vital resource.

The closest Children's Centres from the centre of the Shrublands estate would be the Woodlands and Crosfield Centres. Both are over an hour's walk away (up a steep hill in the case of Woodlands) and around a 40 minute bus journey requiring 2 buses with a probable cost of £3.10 per round trip. Again, the travel time and physical effort required means that those in need would be less likely to use the Children's Centres and in the case of those with older children, it may mean that there is insufficient time to complete the return journey, attend the session and drop-off/collect older children.

Facilities and accessibility within the children's centre buildings to enable continued working in partnership with health colleagues to deliver the Healthy Child Programme.

Purley Oaks

A repeated comment from parents at Purley Oaks Children's Centre is that it is set up to provide the service. It has secure step free access in a welcoming unthreatening environment. Good relationships exist with health colleagues so that the Healthy Child Programme is easily deliverable in this venue. It would be a waste of a well-thought out facility to close the service.

I note that the building which is situated in the centre of the Purley Oaks School precinct, is a Best Start asset. Presumably, the Council would not want to leave the building derelict. However, there is some confusion as to how this valuable asset can be used by external agencies whilst being situated so centrally within the school. There would be a significant safeguarding threat to allowing third party users on site.

Shirley

Shirley is well set up to provide the required services having 2 large playrooms, a large garden area, 1 crèche room, 1 health room and a learning room. It works with statutory and voluntary sector partners to deliver the wider core offer and provides strong delivery of the Healthy Child Programme.

Equalities

The consultation pack states that the Council has "carried out an equality impact assessment, which will be reviewed and updated during and after the consultation." This has not been made available for viewing, presumably because it is clear that these proposals would discriminate against people who hold protected characteristics under the Equalities Act 2010. People with the following characteristics would be discriminated against under the current proposals:

Age: Babies and young children will, with their parents, be the primary users of the children's centres .

Reducing access to a service aimed at a specific age group would be discriminatory.

Disability: Purley Oaks runs specific sessions for parents and children with additional needs such as children with speech and language issues, concerns around development, toddlers with additional needs and children with moderate to severe learning difficulties. Both Purley Oaks and Shirley Children's Centres are accessed by people for whom their disability means that they cannot travel by car or walk long distances.

Removing access to services that provide such provision would be discriminatory towards people with a disability.

Pregnancy and Maternity: The vast majority of adults using the services at Purley Oaks and Shirley are, or have been, recently pregnant, and many of them will still be nursing their children.

It would be discriminatory to remove a service that is primarily used by pregnant or new mothers.

Sex: Almost all adults attending children's centres are women – the response to the consultation will evidence this.

Reducing access to a service primarily accessed by one sex would be discriminatory.

Conclusion

Poor financial governance by the Labour Administration has led to a need to reduce costs across all services that are provided by Croydon Council; statutory services are being reduced to the bare minimum. It is important that any cuts made do not shift costs elsewhere or to a later date as this would not reduce the Council's over all costs. The early years requirement is for a universal service i.e. it should be easily accessible to all. Parents already report that the service is oversubscribed, a situation that would not be positively addressed by more than halving the provision.

The proposed model leaves significant gaps in service across the Borough map.

The removal of a children's centre in Shirley leaves no service for residents of the Shrubland estate which is classified as an area of high deprivation in the consultation documents.

The removal of a Service Access Point in Sanderstead and the removal of service from Purley Oaks means that there is an extraordinarily large geographical area to the South of the Borough with no provision.

In both Shirley and the south of Borough, there will be many residents who will be unable to travel to the nearest alternative due to distance, time, cost and the difficulties of managing family logistics. Therefore, the provision ceases to be a universal service.

With the closure of Purley Pool and Leisure Centre and threats to the service at both Sanderstead and Shirley libraries, both of these areas are seeing a reduction in many of the services that residents in other areas are able to enjoy.

The proposals fail to protect those people with the protected characteristics of Age, Disability, Pregnancy & Maternity and Sex. It is not acceptable to only offer a universal service to people with protected characteristics on the basis of where they live when all people with these characteristics should have access to services.

During the consultation it was noted that most responses to the consultation had come from women, as though this weakened the validity of the responses. It actually demonstrates that this is a service mostly used by one sex and it would be discriminatory to treat their voices as having less value than the other sex.

It has also been noted that of those women who have replied, most have been between 30 and 40 years old. The Office for National Statistics reports that the average age in England and Wales at which women give birth is 30.7 years. Therefore, in Croydon, it is to be expected that the majority of women who have current or past experience of the Best Start provision would be between 30 and 40 years old.

It has also been noted that the majority of consultation responses have been received from people in the south of the Borough. This demonstrates that the greatest loss in provision will be felt in the south of the Borough.

It would be disappointing if the responses to the consultation from those most affected are dismissed as unrepresentative when these responses demonstrate that it is the proposed loss of provision that affects specific members of the Croydon community disproportionately.

I would propose that both of the Children's Centres at Purley Oaks and Shirley are retained.

Purley Children's Centre should be kept as a spoke centre to the Woodlands Hub and this can be funded by CIL and S106 income, whilst Shirley Children's Centre should be kept as a spoke centre to the Selhurst Children's Centre.

The services at these Centres should be seen as an investment in our young people rather than a cost – indeed such an investment will reduce future costs – and the Council should seek to make the early years provision more accessible rather than creating barriers to using the service.